DECATUR MILLER HOUSE
Mount Vernon Place
700 Cathedral Street
Baltimore
Independent City
Maryland

HABS MD-1175
MD-1175

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DECATUR MILLER HOUSE

HABS No. MD–1175

LOCATION: 700 Cathedral Street, northwest corner of Cathedral and Monument streets, Baltimore, Baltimore County, Maryland.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Completed early in 1853, the Decatur Miller House stands among the first dwellings built facing Mount Vernon Place and its erection occurred at the beginning of a major surge of elite residential construction in the area. The structure's well-articulated principal facade—derived from palazzo models of the Italian Renaissance and expertly rendered in brownstone—stood at the height of architectural fashion for mid-nineteenth-century houses located within urban settings. This dwelling and numerous others in the immediate vicinity were designed by the extremely productive Baltimore architectural firm of Niernsee & Neilson, and it remains a particularly fine and comparatively intact example of their work. In organizing the interior space, the firm utilized a *piano nobile,* whereby major public rooms are located a story above the entrance or ground floor.[1] The *piano nobile* was frequently employed in upper-end dwellings of Baltimore's nineteenth-century elite and provided a degree of privacy as well as increased ventilation for a house's most-used living areas.[2]

HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs.

DESCRIPTION:

Located on a high-profile site at the northeastern corner of Monument and Cathedral streets and facing the western edge of Mount Vernon Place, the Decatur Miller House fully retains its nineteenth-century exterior form and detailing. The structure contains four stories and is arranged in two portions, with the front section extending the full width of the lot and much smaller rear portion, or "back building," set slightly back from the plane of the south wall along Monument Street. The back building is further set apart by a simpler treatment of the window frames and a lower roofline that is not capped by the emphatic denticulated cornice defining the top of the front section's eastern, southern, and western walls.

The structure is primarily composed of load-bearing brick walls that are fully faced in brownstone on the east (main) façade, and up to the ground-floor sill line of the south wall

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[1] A contemporary source refers to the Decatur Miller House's "ground floor" as the "basement" with "cellars" located below. Given that popular modern meanings of "basement" and "cellar" hold the terms more-or-less synonymous, in this report the "basement" will be called "ground floor," the *piano nobile* will be "first floor," the floor above "second floor," and so on. "Cellar" will refer to the subterranean level below the ground floor.

[2] For additional information related to row houses and urban townhouses in Baltimore see the reports for 18–28 E. Mount Vernon Place, HABS No. MD–1176; Belvidere Terrace, HABS No. MD–1177; the Graham-Hughes House, HABS No. MD–1178; and the Addendum to Residence Row, HABS No. MD–399.

along Monument Street. At the time of the house's completion in 1853 the structure's stonework elicited specific comment: "the brownstone work, of which there is a very considerable quantity, includ[es] one very rich front on Cathedral street and a base and window dressings on Monument street."[3] The east façade contains window and door openings organized into three bays, with the overall arrangement and detailing broadly referencing the palazzos of Renaissance Italy. The ground level is sheathed in rusticated, ashlar-coursed blocks with the primary entrance emphasized by a heavy carved surround. The upper stories are faced in ashlar-coursed brownstone bearing the most minimal of joints; the smoothness of this treatment contrasts both with the ground floor's rustication as well as the fully carved window frames on the first, second, and third stories.

The stone facing of the east façade meets the common brick of the south façade by means of quoining on the south wall alternating smooth stone facing blocks with visible sections of the brick wall. Two stringcourses, one at the second story's sill line and the other encompassing the lintels of the fourth-floor windows, visually tie the brick wall to the brownstone façade. Similar window proportions—with the largest windows located on the first floor, indicating the importance of these rooms—as well as brownstone window arches and sills on the second and third stories, formally link the two walls. These features also accentuate an elevation that while secondary to the principal facade, still extends along an important thoroughfare and is fully visible. The reduced status of the back building is underscored by a lack of stone window arches, even while their overall proportions mimic those used elsewhere on each story. The window openings are filled with double-hung sash bearing varied numbers of comparatively large panes. A large semicircular bay constructed of wood and holding five large double-hung windows extends from the rear of the first floor and was likely the "conservatory" noted in the 1853 article announcing the house's completion.

While the finely-crafted masonry detailing of the Decatur Miller House deserves comment, the surviving cast-iron verandah affixed to the south wall on the first-floor remains a *tour de force* of ornamental ironwork crafted in antebellum Baltimore. It was cast by Hayward, Bartlett & Co., described as "Baltimore's most important architectural foundry" in the nineteenth century.[4] This feature provides further indication of the first-floor's social importance as well as embellishing the structure's secondary facade. Other extant ironwork includes a first-floor balcony across the front and window guards for the floor-level windows in the south wall of the same story. Interestingly, for these more modest, but still delicate decorative features, Miller secured the services of Andrew Merker, a local blacksmith.[5]

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[3]"Magnificent Residence," *Baltimore Sun* 10 Feb. 1853: (1).

[4]James D. Dilts, "Part One: Introduction," *Baltimore's Cast-iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork*, ed. James D. Dilts and Catherine F. Black (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991), 2; Decatur H. Miller Account Book (hereafter Account Book), MS 1627, [1852-1853] Maryland Historical Society (MHS), Baltimore, Maryland, for Hayward, Bartlett & Co.

[5]Robert L. Alexander, "Architectural Ironwork," Baltimore's Cast-iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork, ed. James D. Dilts and Catherine F. Black (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991), 51, for blacksmith. Alexander notes on pages 56-57 that at the time of publication G. Krug & Son, Inc. still operated in Baltimore. This firm is successor to "A. Merker & Krug," a later partnership of Merker's late in his career. Account Book, for Merker.

The house has not been used single-family residence for some time, and most recently has been turned into a nine-unit condominium.[6] Two external fire escapes on the south and west walls attest to the multiunit state of the structure. On the interior a support has been added to prop up the oval stair and modern systems, kitchens, and bathrooms have been installed. Despite these alterations, its present function, and degradation of the brownstone sheathing, the Decatur Miller House still maintains a high degree of integrity. It contributes to the overall character of the cross-shaped urban plaza and provides a window into the high-style living once found throughout the Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore.

HISTORY:

In February 1853 Decatur Miller's new house—headlined as a "magnificent residence"—had "advanced to completion."[7] In his early thirties at the time of the house's construction, Decatur Miller and his wife Eliza had clearly "arrived." Although not conclusive, census information indicates that Miller, like many others in the nineteenth century, found great wealth through the commercial and industrial expansion of the United States. In 1850 his profession was listed as a "commercial tobacco merchant;" by 1860, he rose to the somewhat vague, but clearly privileged status of "gentleman."[8] During the course of his life, Miller served as a Baltimore City Council member and vice president of the Board of Trade, as well as holding directorships for the Consolidated Coal Company, the B & O Railroad, the Baltimore Dry Dock Company, and the Merchants and Miners Exchange.[9] In building this house, Miller and his wife Eliza concretely expressed both their significant monetary success, as well as their social aspirations and desire for a comfortable, even lavish, future domestic existence.[10]

The Decatur Miller House and a number of others constitute the first generation of residential construction on Mount Vernon and Washington places, as the four parks extending north, south, east, and west from the Washington Monument became the locus of Baltimore's most fashionable nineteenth-century neighborhood. The newly created landscape followed the formal layout of the parks and concurrently with their initial grading and planting.[11] In April 1850, it was announced that each of the squares would receive: "a

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[6]See Edward Gunts, "Customized Approach Alters Mount Vernon," *Baltimore Sun* 22 Nov. 1990: 1H+.

[7]"Magnificent Residence."

[8]U. S. Decennial Census, schedules for Baltimore City, Maryland, 1850 and 1860.

[9]"Decatur Howard Miller," Deilman Hayward Files, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.

[10]Although obviously affluent, the 1860 census schedules indicate that the Millers' wealth was relatively modest when compared with their neighbors in the Mount Vernon district. Where Miller in 1860 held $25,000 in real estate and $10,000 in personal estate, a number of nearby households commanded real estate holdings in excess of $100,000 and personal estates valued at between $90,000 and $100,000.

[11]By 1829 the Washington Monument was largely complete and its statue in place. See the historical report for the "Washington Monument," HABS No. MD–71 for information about the competition, design, and construction. The granite curbing, and cast-iron fencing, gates, and tripods located in the circular park at the column's base were installed between 1836 and 1839. See Alexander, 47–49. A scheme for real estate development used the Monument as a focal point with four parks extending outward from the column. This created an urban plaza in the shape of a Greek cross. The lot

granite base, with the necessary foundation, to correspond in size with the circular base around the Washington Monument...and...iron railings, with the necessary gates and fixtures."[12] The rationale for expending time and energy on formalizing the four parks was crafted in this manner:

> it has always been the pride of every citizen to take a stranger in our city to see the noble monument erected to the memory of the Father of the country, and it has always been a source of mortification to him, to see around it the unmistakeable [*sic*] evidences of a want of public spirit...in the shabby squares laid out for embellishment, but never improved.[13]

Despite this publicly declared logic, the concentration of increasing numbers of well-heeled Baltimoreans in houses located on and near the parks likely had as much to do with the announced facelift as any civic shame. An 1850s photograph of the park located west of the monument depicts the end result of this work with an iron fence set upon stone coping and enclosing a graded, unadorned space with gates on the two short (east and west) sides.[14] The newness of the landscaping is clearly evident given the featureless quality of the enclosure and the youth of the regularly-spaced trees outside the fencing. The view is particularly relevant in that it depicts the extremely visible siting of Decatur Miller's new house. By the time of its construction Mount Vernon and Washington places and the surrounding streets were booming as the center of elite residential construction in Baltimore.[15] An article published a few years prior to the construction of Miller's house stated:

> Mount Vernon Place—This delightful section of our city has lately undergone considerable advancement and improvement, both in regard to the laying off and grading of several additional avenues which lead to it, and the splendid places of residence recently erected thereon, which, for general beauty of exterior, elegant workmanship, and convenience of interior arrangements, would lose nothing in comparison with any similar edifices in the Union. Very recently three dwellings have been finished, and a number of others are rapidly approaching completion, which are among the finest specimans [*sic*] of architecture.[16]

While nineteenth-century urban residential districts, even for the wealthy, ran the risk of having an unrelenting, even monotonous character, the Mount Vernon district was filled

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divisions gave primary importance to the east-west axis, "Mount Vernon Place," whose north and south sides were lined with forty-two deep lots. In comparison, the north-south axis, "Washington Place," possessed only fourteen at its most northern and southern extremities. See MS.10.S.1 4-30, Baltimore City Archives, for an 1868 copy of the lot divisions as authorized by an act of the Maryland State Legislature in 1830. The author is indebted to Lance Humphries for knowledge and a copy of this document.

[12]"Improvements of Washington Place," *Baltimore Sun* 13 Apr. 1850: (1).

[13]"Improving Mt. Vernon Place," *Baltimore Sun* 17 Apr. 1850: (2).

[14]See field notes for photocopy of the stereopticon slide. "Mount Vernon Place Looking West, ca. 1850," [post-1853], Maryland Historical Society Library, Photographs Collection, accessed online, 14 Jan. 2004, http://mdhsimage.mdhs.org/.

[15]Mary Ellen Hayward and Charles Belfoure, *The Baltimore Rowhouse* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 34–35.

[16]"Mount Vernon Place," *Baltimore Sun* 9 Nov. 1848: (1).

with an exciting array of houses representing virtually every popular aesthetic mode from the mid-century onward. For example, the palazzo-inspired Miller house faced off across Monument Street with an interpretive expression of the Greco-Roman Garrett House that once occupied the southwest corner of Cathedral and Monument streets. Interestingly, where the Garrett House's principal facade was oriented to Monument Street, either by choice or by the constraints of lot divisions or previous residential construction, Decatur Miller's house fronted on Washington Place.[17] That Miller possessed one of the more visible building sites on the squares clearly dictated some of the decisions made by the architectural firm of Niernsee & Neilson in designing the structure.

Decatur Miller, like most of his wealthy contemporaries in Baltimore, likely commissioned the office of Niernsee & Neilson for his house because their local dominance in architectural design was, at the time, unquestioned. John R. Niernsee (1814–1885) and J. Crawford Neilson (1816–1900) partnered in 1848, just as the Mount Vernon area began a meteoric antebellum expansion based on wealth generated by Baltimore's rapid nineteenth-century economic and population growth.[18] Austrian-born Niernsee immigrated to the United States from Europe in 1836, where he had received architectural and engineering education at the University of Prague.[19] The level of his education was particularly desirable in a country still lacking colleges or universities with programs in architecture. As eulogized in the *American Architect and Building News* in 1885: "Mr. Niernsee...came to this country when a young man, bringing with him the well-trained mind which German [European] technical education gives. Engineers of high theoretical attainments were not so common here forty years ago as they are now."[20] He was founding member of the national American Institute of Architects.[21] Niernsee spent the bulk of his career in Baltimore working on various projects and in Columbia, South Carolina, for which he oversaw construction of the State House both before and after the Civil War.[22] Between 1848 and 1855, and then again between 1865 and 1875, Niernsee partnered with Baltimore-born J. Crawford Neilson. The early death of Neilson's father sent his English mother and her four children back to the United Kingdom, and later to Brussels, Belgium. After returning to Baltimore in 1833, Neilson was apprenticed in engineering under Benjamin Latrobe, son of the famed architect, and later conducted survey work for railroads and government.[23] Having similar backgrounds in engineering and surveying likely contributed to Niernsee & Neilson's ultimate partnership.

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[17]In the 1830 plat for Washington and Mount Vernon places, the divisions for the lots facing the short ends of the four squares are not indicated.

[18]Randolph W. Chalfant, Catherine E. Black, and James W. Foster, "Niernsee & Neilson," ed. James T. Wollon, Historical Research Files, Baltimore Architecture Foundation, Baltimore, Maryland, for birth, death, and partnership dates. Withey and Withey's biographical dictionary incorrectly puts Niernsee's birth year at 1831, likely a typo resulting in the transposition of the last two numerals, and misspells his surname. See Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, "Nierensee, (Major) John R.," *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co., 1956), 442.

[19]Chalfant et al.

[20]"Death of John R. Niernsee, Architect," *American Architect and Building News* 4 Jul. 1885: 1.

[21]Chalfant et al.

[22]"Death of John R. Niernsee."

[23]Chalfant et al.

During Niernsee & Neilson's initial collaboration launched in 1848, the office established a standard for both professionalism and competence among architectural firms in Baltimore. [24] Their design activity was far-reaching and included an array of types including urban and estate houses, churches, railway stations, commercial and institutional structures, and warehouses.[25] They became particularly favored for the residences constructed by Baltimore's wealthy and powerful on and around Mount Vernon and Washington places; however, Niernsee & Neilson's expertise and popularity did not come cheaply. [26] Miller paid the firm a hefty $1,315.70, (an estimated $29,902.27 in 2003, if adjusted for inflation), roughly 4.5% of the structure's total cost of $29,131.26 (an estimated $662,074.09 in 2003).[27]

The cost of the dwelling and the architect's fee are only two of the many and varied expenses associated with the house's construction surviving in a meticulously detailed ledger. Decatur Miller's business acumen likely led to the creation of this document and it provides a rare and significant glimpse at the number and type of craftsmen, laborers, and suppliers involved in the production of expensive nineteenth-century urban dwellings. From F. Winkleman, recorded as digging and lining the privy for $52.00, to J. W. & H. T. Gernhard, who sold Miller a stained glass skylight for $115.00, to O. Boulding, responsible for surveying the lot, no fewer than thirty-six individuals and firms were involved in either supplying materials or aspects of the house's planning and construction.[28] To have the plans for his four-story house brought to fruition, Decatur Miller—like his other class contemporaries—and architects Niernsee & Neilson needed a variety of skilled and unskilled laborers, both for general construction requirements as well as those more specific to elite mid-nineteenth-century construction. General laborers were required to dig the foundations and masons of varying abilities required for the brick and stonework. The masonry house had rubble-stone foundations, bricks in the upper walls, brownstone for the facade and details including lintels, sills, and stringcourses, and carved marble for the fireplace mantels. Carpenters were essential for framing the floors and partition walls, constructing the staircases and window frames, turning balusters, and for creating and installing the trim and other finely crafted wood details. Plasterers crafted the finished wall surfaces and plain and decorative ceilings; suppliers furnished nails, railings, clamps, iron bars, and decorative elements; glaziers filled standard and decorative window sash with glass panes; and roofers installed the tin roof sheathing.

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[24]See Chalfant et al, for professionalism.

[25]Randolph W. Chalfant, "Building List: Niernsee and Neilson Architects of Baltimore," John R. Niernsee file, Baldwin Memorial Archive, American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Keep in mind that while the dollar conversion itself is more-or-less accurate, it would not be possible to replace Decatur Miller's house in kind for $662,074.09. The materials and/or workmanship employed during its construction are not as widely found, if available at all, in early-twenty-first-century Baltimore. As a result, the cost for replication would be considerably greater. Inflation-adjusted amounts based on conversion figures provided by Robert Sahr in "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors 1800 to estimated 2013 to Convert to Dollars of 2003 (Estimated)," Oregon State University, accessed online, 14 Jan. 2004, http://oregonstate.edu/Dept/pol_sci/fac/sahr/ sahr.htm; Account Book, for architect's commission. The total cost of the house as listed in the ledger was $32,011.26, including $2880.00 in new furniture. The percentage calculation was taken from Miller's total less, the cost of the furniture, or $29,131.26.

[28]Unless otherwise noted, all names, materials, and associated costs are drawn from Account Book.

While the traditional crafts required to construct the Decatur Miller house operated in their own sophisticated and complex manner, construction of this expensive dwelling was further complicated by inclusion of cutting-edge mechanical systems and domestic technologies, developed in the decades leading up to 1850. Over the course of the nineteenth century, prototypical versions of all modern utility systems and their associated equipment appeared and rapidly evolved. These features were first installed in the urban houses of the affluent, and later spread to the other groups. By the time of the Decatur Miller house construction, no house meant for elite urban dwellers was complete without gas piping for lights, furnaces and ducts for early forms of convective warm air heat, and conduits for bringing water into the house.[29] Just those aspects of outfitting the house totaled $1449.80 (roughly 5% of the total cost as recorded by Miller). The house of John H. Duvall, completed about three years before Decatur Miller's on the south side of West Mount Vernon Place on a design by Niernsee, possessed utilitarian features described in a period newspaper article.[30] It noted that the dwelling was:

> **fully equal to the others [in the area] in beauty of exterior, with a perfection of requirements for easy house-keeping in the arrangements of pantries, closets, private rooms, house-keepers' rooms, and bathrooms, affording a plentiful supply of hot and cold water, hot air furnaces, and a number of other modern improvements.**[31]

Beyond similar mechanical installations as recorded by Miller in his construction ledger, the company who made and supplied the "plumbing and furnaces"—Hayward [Bartlett] & Co.—was the same for both houses.[32] The families building houses on and near Mount Vernon Place not only possessed the cache of a desirable location, but also dwellings with domestic luxuries unknown to all but an infinitesimal group of Americans.

Decatur Miller's lot was located at the northwest corner of Monument and Cathedral streets.[33] In a tradition of urban house design entrenched in Baltimore and other eastern

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[29]Building plans and sections of the John H. Duvall house located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania clearly show voids in the walls, in which heated air would rise the throughout dwelling. Additionally, although water was piped into the house to service sinks and a single bathtub, a municipal sewerage system was still a long time in coming. As indicated by the plans, at the Duvall residence, an interior toilet located in its own room at the back of the second story connected to the privy pit two stories below by means of a pipe. This gravity toilet, positioned near the room containing the bathtub, was the only one accessible from within the house. Four more toilets were located at ground level directly above the privy pit, and arranged in two rooms accessed through exterior doors positioned outside the kitchen and scullery.

[30]Although no longer a single-family residence, the Duvall House remains extant and located at 5 West.

[31]"Mount Vernon Place."

[32]Ibid., for Duvall; Account Book, for Miller.

[33]At the time of construction, the Miller family did not own the lot on which their house was being built. Baltimore used a system of ground rent where outright ownership of the land itself could be brokered independently from the structures or development rights. While the house was under construction, the lot on which it stood was sold to someone apparently outside of the family. If the option to buy was offered at that time to the Millers, it is possible that despite considerable wealth they did not have the resources to both buy the land and fund construction of their opulent dwelling. It was not until 12 September 1859 that

cities by the middle of the nineteenth century, multistory dwellings—even ones not conceived of as part of a larger row—generally filled the lot line along the street face, abutting neighboring houses, and extended back deep into the block. If the depth of the house was greater than two principal rooms, a rear section—the "back building"—was often inset on one side to allow for windows in center rooms, forming an "ell." The ell usually contained lower-status rooms and service spaces, although on the principal story it might also include additional public rooms. Although Miller's house was more than two-rooms-deep, given its location on a corner he did not have to employ an ell for light and ventilation; the long Monument Street elevation provided for a more-than-adequate number of windows. The house took up the full width of the lot, however a full-height back building of sorts—denoted by a smaller, simpler cornice and a simplified treatment of window lintels and sills rather than a significantly narrower footprint—was positioned at the rear. On account of this corner siting, the house also possessed two public faces, the primary one facing Mount Vernon Place and the secondary and much longer one extending along Monument Street—a constraint skillfully handled by Niernsee & Neilson.

Like most of their contemporaries, Niernsee & Nielson designed proficiently in a number of popular expressions. Rather than utilizing Greek features as they had with the opulent Thomas House of 1848, for the narrow frontage of Miller's dwelling Niernsee & Neilson turned to Renaissance palazzo models, which were becoming very modish for urban buildings in the United States. In a manner not unlike its quattrocento and cinquecento Italian predecessors, the Decatur Miller house contained a facade bearing a rusticated base with finely cut ashlar coursing above, standing in direct contrast to the robust stone architraves framing the windows above. Similar to its Italian forerunners, the Miller house was organized into regular bays with the principal living spaces raised above a full-height ground floor in a true *piano nobile* arrangement, indicated on the exterior by the floor-to-ceiling windows, opulent window frames and an iron balustrade on the east face, and a large iron verandah cantilevered from the south wall.

The rusticated and ashlar coursing and the carved door and window surrounds on the primary facade were all of a species of sandstone known broadly as "brownstone." Although most often seen in surviving row houses in New York, particularly Brooklyn, brownstone-fronted urban dwellings achieved a degree of popularity in all cities along the eastern seaboard in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Red-tinted brown in color, brownstone was a desirable material on account of its easy workability. This quality also limited its use to facing only, rather than structural blocks. In the case of the Decatur Miller House, its brownstone face was affixed to the front of a thin brick structural wall. This type of construction—with brownstone sheathing fronting a brick base—was better founded than less expensive alternatives described in an 1852 pamphlet published by well-

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Eliza C. Miller ("wife of Decatur H. Miller") purchased the lot for a bargain five dollars and merged ownership of the land with the structure built upon it. The absurdly low sale price suggests a standing relationship of some sort between the seller and the buyer. See Deed, Baltimore City Land Records, G. E. S. 177, folio 333.

known German architect, Gottfried Semper. In this work, Semper forwards a description of row house construction in New York as observed by a contemporary in 1851.[34]

> The mason makes the walls of the next story also one foot thick, the carpenter again lays his twenty-four-footers, and so it goes for the third, fourth, and fifth floors. The front of the building is still open...The stonecutter, depending on the owner's means, claps on to the front a layer of architecture in red sandstone, marble, or granite, often beautiful and richly ornamented, but just as often bad, which he hitches to the back walls and the carpenter's partitions with iron clamps.[35]

Despite its comparative affordability when compared to other types of stone, brownstone was still an expensive facing material. Even pricey new houses built in the Mount Vernon area in 1851 and described as "among the most beautiful and commodious dwellings" possessed fronts not of brownstone, but rather "appearing in a faithful imitation of brown stone."[36] Given the use of brownstone, its modish palazzo-inspired facade, and an extremely desirable location, Decatur Miller possessed one of the most outwardly fashionable new houses appearing in antebellum Baltimore.

Upon entry into the Decatur Miller House, the arrangement and finish of its interior spaces equaled the presence and stylishness of the exterior. As completed, the dwelling contained all the spaces requisite for living a genteel and gracious mid-nineteenth-century life. Raised a full story above the street, the *piano nobile* contained "two drawing rooms, boudoir, music room, cabinet and conservatory."[37] One story below at house's forward end stood a library, dining room, and spacious entryway. Generally speaking, these rooms and the most of those on the floor above constituted the dwelling's public and semipublic regions, places where the Millers spent most of the daily lives and where family, friends, and acquaintances were received and entertained. Those visiting the Millers passed into the house's entry hall, which in turn gave onto a central stairhall dominated by an immense semi-elliptical stair possessing a scale more in keeping with period institutions than period residences. Far from being merely utilitarian, this feature extended four stories upward and was lighted by an opulent stained-glass skylight, affording the structure a dramatic vertical axis. The feature was notable enough to be described in 1853:

> The principal stair of this house is really magnificent, being contained in a large elliptical hall, lighted from above by stained glass. The ease and boldness of the rich, massive rail and balustres [sic] with the fine sweep of the stairway, make this one of the handsomest and most agreeable features of this fine building.

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[34]Gottfried Semper, *Wissenschaft, Industrie, und Kunst* (Brunswick, 1852), 21–24, as translated by Winslow Ames in "New York Brownstone through German Eyes, 1851," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25:1 (Mar. 1966): 63–64.

[35]Ames, 64.

[36]"Handsome Residences," *Baltimore Sun* 22 Jan. 1852: (1). Facades of this type were generally constructed of brick and covered in stucco, incised and painted to mimic ashlar courses of stone.

[37]"Magnificent Residence." Unless otherwise noted, all information and quotations related to the house's interior are drawn from this article.

While the stair's significant visual presence was meant to impress visitors and provide an appropriate link between the public and semipublic spaces on the ground and first floors, it also provided primary access to the upper stories. The second and third floors "contain[ed] the most beautiful chambers, dressing and bath rooms, each admirably arranged, and developing artistic and mechanical skill of rare excellence." Wealthy households like the Millers required the employment of relatively large numbers of servants and, accordingly, their houses contained a number of service spaces necessary for executing various domestic tasks.[38] In addition to the public and semipublic spaces positioned forward on the ground floor, that level also included a housekeeper's room, pantry, storeroom, kitchen, "and other conveniences," with cellars, ostensibly for storage, located below. Although not mentioned in the description of the house, it also possessed a secondary stair towards the rear that allowed for quick and unobtrusive movement of servants throughout the house.

Significantly, in addition to chronicling every aspect of the house's construction in terms of materials and labor costs, Miller's account book also described $2880.00 (more than an estimated $65,000 in 2003) in furniture purchases for the drawing rooms, library, dining room, and a number of bedchambers. Although not fully comprehensive, the quantity of new furniture acquired by the Millers for their house indicated that either they were moving from much smaller quarters or strove to possess contents whose quality, utility, and beauty approached that of the structure for which they were purchased.

SOURCES:

Alexander, Robert L. "Architectural Ironwork." Baltimore's Cast-iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork. Ed. James D. Dilts and Catherine F. Black. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991. 46–57.

Baldwin Memorial Archive. American Institute of Architects. Washington, D.C.

Baltimore City Land Records.

Chalfant, Randolph W., Catherine E. Black, and James W. Foster. "Niernsee & Neilson." Historical Research Files. Baltimore Architecture Foundation. Baltimore, Maryland.

"Death of John R. Niernsee." American Architect and Building News 4 Jul. 1885: 1.

Decatur H. Miller Account Book. MS 1627. Maryland Historical Society. [1852-1853] Baltimore, Maryland.

[38]The 1850 Baltimore City census schedules noted a twenty-six year old woman, Kate M. Kamfer, resident in the Miller household. While the occupation of this woman, born in Germany, is not known, she was undoubtedly a servant of some sort, given the patterns of census information as well as the affluence of the Millers. By this time the Millers had two young children, and Kamfer may have been their nurse. The 1860 schedules also only included a single servant, twenty-six year old Bessie Kelly, who was born in Ireland and nurse to the Miller's four children. As slavery was a legal institution in Maryland, it is entirely plausible that the Miller household included enslaved black domestic servants up to the Civil War.

Dilts, James D. "Part One: Introduction." Baltimore's Cast-iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork. Ed. James D. Dilts and Catherine F. Black. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991. 2–11.

Gunts, Edward. "Customized Approach Alters Mount Vernon." Baltimore Sun 22 Nov. 1990: 1H+.

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ADDENDUM TO:
DECATUR MILLER HOUSE
Mount Vernon Place
700 Cathedral Street
Baltimore
Independent City
Maryland

HABS MD-1175
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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